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CCS-22-003  
March 2022

## Marin Alsop: A study in inclusive leadership

In 2005, the board of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO) appointed conductor Marin Alsop as the orchestra's next Music Director, to begin in the 2007 season. It was the culmination of Alsop's lifetime of commitment to both classical music and conducting. It was hailed as a historic appointment – the first time that a major US orchestra had appointed a woman leader. For her, the experience was, “a defining moment, both as a human being and as a conductor.”

Alsop had her dream job – but then the backlash began.

### Bias in classical music

Alsop had achieved her success in a white, male-dominated profession where prominent male conductors routinely made public gender-related comments, such as the claim that women, being inherently weak, were unfit to lead orchestras<sup>1</sup>, or that “a sweet girl on the podium can make one's thoughts drift towards something else.”<sup>2</sup>

### Building the dream

Born in 1956 the only child of two classical musicians, Alsop does not remember a time when music wasn't part of her life. “I was so young when my parents steered me toward music,” she reflected. Aged two, she began to learn piano. By seven, she was a pre-college violin student at Juilliard. At nine, after seeing Leonard Bernstein conduct a Young People's Concert in New York, she decided she wanted to be a conductor herself. At that young age, Alsop hadn't noticed that orchestras, conductors and classical music was generally seen as a domain for white men only. Hearing her aspirations, her (male) violin teacher promptly told her that girls don't conduct. Alsop relayed his opinion to her parents – and came down to breakfast the next morning to find a set of conductor's batons that her father had carved by hand. “Growing up in this ‘can-do’ environment really shaped who I am and how I approach everything,” she mused.

Alsop began Yale University in 1972, transferring in 1975 to the Juilliard School in New York City, where she earned bachelor's (1977) and master's (1978) degrees in violin performance. She started a swing band and performed as a studio musician, but her childhood dream of conducting was always in the back of her mind. She decided to return to school to study conducting. “But I got rejected from everything,” she explained. “I mean, I couldn't get into conductor school. I was rejected from Juilliard four times – and I had just gotten my master's there. But I wanted to conduct . . . so I had to figure out how to start my own orchestra.” In 1984, with financial support from a mentor – businessman and philanthropist Tomio Taki – she founded the Concordia Orchestra, launching her conducting career.

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